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Spying gets serious treatment

National policy links sought in new survey

Secret Intelligence in the Twentieth Century, by Constantine Fitzgibbon. New York: Stein and Day. 335 pp. $10.

By Burke Wilkinson

Constantine Fitzgibbon, the Anglo-American novelist and biographer, has taken all spying in his disordered century as his province. Some of the vast canvas he covers is thinly-limned, for his knowledge of the Near and Far East appears to be negligible. But in the areas of his first-hand experience and concern – the United Kingdom the United States, the Soviet Union, Germany, and France – he succeeds quite brilliantly in his ambitious design.

His credentials are considerable, for he served in both the British and American armies as an intelligence officer. He was party to the Ultra Secret, helping as a major on General Bradley's staff to funnel the information derived from the cracking of the German code-machine called Enigma.

In this, his 28th book, Fitzgibbon has a much more serious objective than retelling the best tales of spy and counterspy. He seeks to identify and clarify the relationship between over-all national policy and secret intelligence, in the countries of his choice. This gives a frame and an underlying seriousness to subject matter that so often tends to remain at the level of entertainment.

Books

It is quite remarkable how well he succeeds. There are inevitably dry passages in the pages on policy, but there are also flashes of insight that help a lot.

Here are some of the insights that emerge:

The British-American two-party systems (based on the games we play in school, Fitzgibbon says) makes us see our enemy's enemy as our friend. By contrast, the Russians have a skill in "triangular warfare." In much the same spirit that they play chess, the game of their national excellence, they manage to keep their eye on the ultimate goal. They are willing to sacrifice a pawn or pursue a knight's erratic course to achieve the final victory.

According to Fitzgibbon, the United States is not always fertile ground for enemy spying. American policy, it seems, has tended to be short-range: "And when American intentions were unknown, it was almost invariably because such intentions did not exist beyond the next presidential campaign." Here the author shows his gift for crisp generalization: "This is perhaps the most foolproof form of security imaginable, but was not usually regarded as consistent with statecraft of the highest order."

In broad context now, we learn about M.I.5 and M.I.6, the Abwehr, the NKVD, the CIA and the other networks – their differences in style and technique, their overall sameness and grayness.

In the process, we pick up startling nuggets, such as how the U.S. ignored a British warning that, on a certain fateful December day, a Japanese task force was changing course from Alaska to Pearl Herbor.

Almost equally spectacular is the cover story that was invented about how an Allied agent in Switzerland, the famous "Man Called Lucy," had infiltrated the German high command – a device enabling the British to pass the Ultra Secret along to Russia without revealing the source.

Fitzgibbon is capable, in his canter across his vast terrain, of some first-class howlers and fictions. The thrust of the evidence so far is that "Cicero" was *not* a double agent, and he died in Germany not Albania. President Roosevelt's Ambassador to Russia was Joseph E. Davies, not "a Mr. Davis." It was the ineffable Captain Boy-Ed himself who left the briefcase stuffed with secrets in the New York elevated. The U.S., alas, still *does* place non-career diplomats in "the most important posts" at about the same rate as ever.

No matter! Constantine Fitzgibbon slashes away at a subject that no one with his combination of experience, zest, opinionatedness, and style has ever tackled before.

Commander Burke Wilkinson's suspense novel, "Night of the Short Knives," and his new biography of Erskine Childers, "The Zeal of the Convert," both draw on his experiences in naval operational intelligence in World War II.